

Chapter Ten

THE STAFF REVUES

*We saw a little water by the golf course,
It looked something like the smelly River Clyde,
But when we got our cameras geared,
The whole darn thing had disappeared,
Let's name it old St. Andrews-by-the-Tide.*
— From “St. Andrews-by-the-Tide”

THE 1950S AND early 1960s were a happy time at the Algonquin. Almost every year for more than a decade the staff put on carefree and outrageous variety revues at the Casino, featuring kick lines, blackface routines, parodies of popular songs, magic shows and even some serious ballet. They quickly became a hotel tradition. Guests would sometimes call ahead to get the dates for that summer's revue so that they could plan their vacations accordingly.

It was the golden era of the television variety show. Even if staff do not remember being influenced by anything in particular at the time, this form of entertainment was big business by the early 1950s. Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* and *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* started it off in 1948. Other shows hosted by Arthur Godfrey, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, Sid Caesar, Jack Benny, Steve Allen, Lawrence Welk, and Dinah Shore followed through the 1950s.

Appropriately for the Algonquin, the television variety hour seems to have gotten its start in the hotel business. The variety show was an essential part of the Borscht Belt circuit, a conclave of Catskills summer resorts to which New Yorkers, mostly Jewish, flocked in the summer months. Sid Caesar, Imogen Coca, Danny Kaye, Neil Simon, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen all launched themselves into show business in the

Bill Leonard
Herb. Hand
John ...
Marian ...
Chris MacLeod

Wed. and Thurs.
August 18 and 19
Casino:

Ben ...
Bill McKern

A

Bob ...

L

Mary Baker
Frank ...
Ray ...

A

C

ARTE

Isabel Wood

Ray ...

Donald ...
Mary ...

Mary Jane Magee

Co-Producer and Director
-Mary Jane Magee
-Al Redner.

The Staff Revues

Borscht Belt; it was considered basic training. By the late 1940s, the genre had moved to Canada and Norman Jewison was putting together superb variety shows at the Banff Springs Hotel.

THE VERY FIRST Algonquin summer shows were actually operettas orchestrated by a remarkable young Montrealer, Ian MacMillan. The fun began in tragedy. In June 1949, before the hotel had opened for the summer, a terrible accident occurred: a young Ottawa waitress, Marilyn Noells, dove into Katy's Cove and broke her neck. The hotel seems to have been at fault. It was early in the season, and staff had apparently not been informed of the variation in water levels as the tide drained and refilled the cove. By the end of the summer Manager Cashman had been transferred to another hotel, and later Noells's father won a large court settlement. For the moment, however, more immediate assistance was required, and staff chipped in to raise money for their colleague.

MacMillan, a music student, worked as a Casino attendant in the summer of 1949, and he put his musical gifts to work to raise money for Noells. MacMillan had been teaching music in the Sherbrooke area. He played sixteen instruments, including piano, and had already had several compositions published. He planned to continue his studies at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston in the fall. On August 22 and 23, he and the sixty members of the hotel staff who had formed the Algonquin Theatre Group presented an operetta entitled *A Guardsman's Duty* at Andraeleo Hall. A romantic piece set in Hungary in the late eighteenth century, it focused on a troupe of honour guards and their ladies. Some of the choruses were written for eight-part harmony with solo leads. Given the complexity of the piece, it seems likely that this was a work in progress, whipped into shape for this urgent occasion.

The event was sponsored and attended by the cream of St. Andrews summer society. Lieutenant-Governor D.L. MacLaren was there, as were Sir Montague Allan, Senator Cairine Wilson, Sir James and Lady Dunn, Howard Pillow and Mrs. Pillow, Olive Hosmer, Lady Mortimer Davis, Hon. Marguerite Shaughnessy, and many more. Cuddy O'Brien recalls that everybody was dressed to the nines, and it was like an evening at the Met. Music was provided by the Algonquin orchestra under the direction of Clarence Sawyer. The production sold out both nights, and it was reviewed glowingly by ex-Mayor Worrell in his weekly column for the *Courier*. He remembered in particular the final scene in the gypsy camp, with the beautiful background of fields and woods, campfires burning brightly, and a group of handsome young men, bound in captivity and surrounded by a score or more of beautiful young women.

MacMillan's success encouraged him to try his hand at yet another oper-



Ian MacMillan, lower left, at a staff farewell, 1949 or 1950. CUDDY O'BRIEN

OPPOSITE *Autographed A la Carte Program*, 1954. GARY DEGEER

THE ALGONQUIN

etta the following summer: *The Princess and the Woodcutter*, his own composition. Again he assumed total control, writing, directing, and even designing the costumes and props. The piece was staged entirely by Algonquin staff after only five weeks of rehearsal. Again, the performance was a fund-raiser, this time to benefit the Passamaquoddy branch of the Canadian Legion.

The *Woodcutter* was played by Kenneth Jennings of Bathurst, New Brunswick, then a medical student at McGill, and the *Princess* by Betsy Kennedy of Toronto. Montrealer André Menard, who had been studying ballet in Paris, appeared in this, as in the previous production, as the leading dancer. The chorus of fifty-five voices wore elaborate costumes made by members of the group. A young drummer named John Petrinka was recruited from the Algonquin orchestra to play the tympani. Because he could not read music, he was told by MacMillan simply to watch his baton, doing a roll on the right drum when it moved right, and a roll on the left when it moved left. Petrinka remembers MacMillan as an affable fellow, a bit erratic at times, but thorough. The excellent crowds applauded loudly.

That was MacMillan's last summer at the Algonquin. He was back at Mount Allison University in the fall of 1951, and a picture of him survives from that year in a performance of *The Intruder*. For some reason he left without taking a degree.

IN 1953 THE staff staged the first summer variety show, *Front Please*. Under the direction of Judy Graham and Don Stephens, it was performed for two nights in late August to packed houses. The venue was the Casino, and the master of ceremonies was bell porter Victor Burt.

Something of the fun and creativity that was put into that production is reflected in an incident recalled by Cuddy O'Brien. As he walked into the lobby one morning he was annoyed to see a group of bellmen playing golf. As he approached they began to whisper, "Here Comes the Captain! Here comes the Captain!" Then they jumped back, saluted, and sang a parody of Frankie Lane's "Lucky Old Sun," ending with:

But that lucky old captain's got nothin' to do
But stroll around the lobby all day.

It was a poke at O'Brien on several levels. Like Lane's sun, with nothing to do but roll around Heaven all day, O'Brien had nothing to do but stroll about, giving orders to his lackies. "And they put that in the show," says O'Brien.

The show was more or less impromptu, a hodgepodge of whatever the cast was able or prepared to do on short notice. As with later productions, hotel life itself was a minor theme. "Front please" is the call for a bellman to come to the front desk, and some of the skits made fun of normal situations



Two skits from "Front Please:"

TOP Wilma Clark.
BOTTOM Gary DeGeer and Bill Leonard in a guest's borrowed clothing. VICTOR BURT

in hotel life involving staff and guests. Manager Pat Fitt, for example, had a peculiar walk, and when greeting guests would thrust out his hand and bark, “Fitt’s the name!” One of the mimics on staff had this idiosyncrasy down perfectly, and Fitt, it is recalled, had a fit. As for guests, some fun could be poked at them as well, but Al Redner, kitchen steward and producer of the 1954 show, recalls that this was done very discreetly, and no one ever got into trouble for it.

Most remember the shows as nothing too serious, just a lot of fun, sometimes outrageous, with clowning around, comic skits, and a lot of cross-dressing. There were top hats and Algonquin maidens, college cheerleaders and cavemen, and the *de rigueur* kick line. But there was no swearing—men might swear among themselves, but never in front of a girl or an audience—or serious sexual innuendo.

The shows included real talent, too. Wilma Douglas of Toronto, now Wilma Clark of St. Andrews, worked the cash register during the summer of 1953. She had been singing professionally with the Leslie Bell Singers in Toronto since 1946 and returned to the internationally known choir after her stint at the Algonquin. In *Front Please* she remembers holding a paint brush and singing “A Little Whitewashed Building by the Barn,” with a chorus joining in.

The 1954 revue was titled *À La Carte*, with the obligatory pun on hotel life. Directed by Mary Jane Magee and Al Redner, it featured cancons, saloon girls, a square dance, serenades courtesy of Dave Hurst and his Lobby Lullabiers on washboards and ukuleles, a farm skit, and a routine about the longest bar in Texas, with bellmen Gary DeGeer and Bill Leonard dressed in the wild stripes and checks of one of the hotel’s guests. Assistant Accountant Terry Grier, later president of Ryerson, sang with his barbershop quartet, the Razor Blades. He recalls that some of the acts polished their presentations by performing earlier in the season at Casino dances while the band was taking a break.

In 1954, Don Williams was starting his long career at the Algonquin as one of the hotel’s better-loved managers. Williams had a sense of humour and occasionally

“ST. ANDREWS BY-THE-TIDE”

A HIGHLIGHT OF the 1954 revue *À la Carte* was this song by Dave MacDonald. A whimsical glance at the area’s thirty-foot tides, it took a poke at the disappointment of some visitors at finding the moniker “St. Andrews-by-the-Sea” inaccurate twice daily.

*We’ve travelled twice around the world,
From Bombay to Fort Worth,
We’ve water skied in Venice,
And won loving cups in tennis,
We’ve seen it all!
But there’s just one thing we want to know.*

Chorus:

*What happened to the sea at St. Andrews,
Where are the mermaids and the octopoo?
There are no ships or sailboats to speak of,
Not even any Indian canoes.*

*Now when we came way up here for the summer,
We thought we’d see the ocean so blue,
But now every day we see Passamaquoddy Bay,
And a weather-beaten jelly fish or two.*

*We brought along our swimsuits in a suitcase,
From America’s finest springboards we have dove,
But much to our dismay as we reached the great seaway,
The little sign said “Caution, Katy’s Cove.”*

*We saw a little water by the golf course,
It looked something like the smelly River Clyde,
But when we got our cameras geared,
The whole darn thing had disappeared,
Let’s name it old St. Andrews-by-the-Tide. ~*